

Theologians of our Time

IX. The Theology of Gustaf Aulén

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ARCHBISHOP Nathan Söderblom towers over the Swedish theological landscape. A new age of both personal and scholarly openness in Swedish theology broke through with him and with his theological co-worker, Einar Billing. For me, Gustaf Aulén is Söderblom's Elisha. Through his life blows the same easy informality, modesty, and naturalness, intense interest in the church, its mission, its liturgy, and its music, and at least something of the same concern for ecumenicity. But whereas Söderblom's eager, electric interest in nearly every form of knowledge was seldom steadily focused, Aulén has channelled his talents along systematic lines. Although he had to interrupt his years as Professor of Systematic theology at Lund University to spend the last decades of his life in the Bishopric of Strängnäs, his concern for Christian dogmatics and his exceptional discipline in his task stand out consistently even through his writings in retirement, once again at Lund. Unquestionably Bishop Aulén owes much of his inspiration, methodological formulations, and the isolating and development of the agape motif to his former professorial colleague and co-bishop Anders Nygren, but Aulén is the developer *par excellence* of the Lundensian theology systematically. The writings of both men, which strongly support each other, are theological staples throughout the world, but Aulén's *The Faith of the Christian Church* has been required reading for more than a decade in many first-class theological colleges in their courses in systematic theology, certainly in the United States. He is therefore well known already, and the present article aims to present only a general survey of his theological viewpoint, with a bit of appraisal for good measure!

I

Aulén's theological method is thoroughly Lundensian, but his concern is primarily with systematic formulation. Anders Nygren and Ragnar Bring worked more widely than Aulén on the philosophical presuppositions of faith and their implications for theological method as such. Thus the Lund theologians together, led primarily by

Nygren, wrought a Kantian basis of religion wherein critical philosophy uncovers the root of religion as man's analytically necessary response *coram deo*, or within 'the category of eternity', the logical presupposition of all categories of human experience. Accordingly all men live by an unprovable faith, Kant's Copernican revolution in philosophy having abolished metaphysics. With no knowledge of the transcendent realm possible, and left with only transcendental certainties, or, in other words, with knowledge of ultimate reality forever banned, and with only principles of validity analytically derived from experience and dependent upon it to go by, man has available no over-arching supernatural truth by which he can judge or compare religions. Each religion therefore offers nothing but faith. Nevertheless, the great historic religions constitute man's basic choices for faith. Each religion, moreover, presents a definite inner unity in terms of fundamental motifs which organize and direct the faith of the religious community. The fundamental motif of the Christian faith is agape, the distinctive and determinative pattern of the New Testament. Such was the main methodological construction of Lundensian theology that characteristically formed the assumed background for Aulén's systematic formulations.

Aulén's own proper stress is to the effect that theology is the task of describing the faith of the Church. It is a strict science among sciences, delimiting its distinctive field and determining its own characteristic method. Theology is unexceptionally descriptive. It is through and through an objective discipline. It is never speculative. The theologian does not describe his own vision of God nor make inferences from some experience in general. Theology never becomes confused with the philosophy of religion. Theology is not normative. It never sets out to tell or to prove what is true. Neither is theology a historical discipline as such. Theology is, rather, the description of the faith not in terms of the changes of historical development but in terms of its own living centre. The object of faith came, of course, from God in and for history, but is not the history of man's developing understanding, except as

what is already inherent in the faith once for all clarified by the succeeding activity of faith on the part of the Church? God's revelation is ever central to theology, not man's understanding or appropriation of the revelation. In the same way, Christian theology declares all confessional theologies bankrupt as partial human responses to human interpreters, be it Luther, Calvin, or Wesley. Christian theology at its centre and to its utmost edges is one as Christ is one.

Even though Nature and history do not as a whole reveal God, and even though history does not produce the Christian faith, nevertheless, both the basis and the building of the Christian faith are historical. History as such is no predicate of revelation, but it contains both the focus and the locus of revelation. Therefore study of both Biblical and historical theology are essential tasks for the theologian. The eternal Word, the divine logos, and that Word active in the new age of the Christian Church, the divine skopos, are prerequisite areas for theological formulation. The fact that Aulén has such high appreciation of history he showed by his writing *Dogmhistoria* (*The History of Dogma*) and *Den kristna gudsbilden* (*The Christian Picture of God*), which early historical works started his careful career as a theologian.

Another feature of his method which is distinctive and of primary importance is his understanding of the 'limits of faith'. Faith always lives in daring tension. Faith is neither rational seeing nor glorying in the absurd beyond reason. Faith is grappling with the problems of life and thought in the context of the determinative motif before God. Daring tension (*dristig spänning*) is indispensable to the life of faith. All historical and speculative concerns that lie outside the main revelation and that destroy this central tension before God are non-essential and even distracting for true faith. What of God's eternity, what of the historical details of the resurrection of Christ, what of the content of life after death? Concern with these within faith dilute the affirmations of faith and lessen the tension. Aulén has a most powerful drive to direct what he calls 'the faith' (*tron*) to the central disclosures of revelation which produce the dynamic tension of a living trust in God.

II

Aulén is conclusively the theologian of God's divine love in Christ. Passing from his method to the content of his theology, we must note the definitive centrality of agape as the fundamental motif of the Christian faith. Not to take Aulén seriously here is to miss the mid-point of all his theology. Aulén intends and effectively carries

out the mandate of agape as the central truth for Christian theology. In a brief appraisal we shall note what to me would be even more consistent findings, but these are not so much contradictions as elaborations of what Aulén has already given us.

Aulén's view of agape is God-centred. It is no philosophy with invariant entailment. It is the picture of the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and such purposes and relations as flow from His will of sovereign Love. Agape is God's Christ-deed. All creation springs from God's agape but the explicit declaration of it is in Christ. Agape is the nature and will of God as personal Spirit. The Church was founded by Christ who is agape. No one can lay any other foundation for forgiveness and salvation than Christ who is the eternal declaration of God's faithfulness. Sin is failure to trust and to obey God as agape. Eternity is the time of God's agape, for time is adjectival to God.

Aulén illustrates God as agape by the work of Christ in redemption. Here once again Aulén resorts to the historical method. The use of history to uncover Christian doctrine is with Aulén almost on a par with his main stress on the systematic exposition of it. Thus in his influential volume, *Christus Victor*, first published in Swedish in 1930, Aulén traces the various types of the interpretation of the Atonement through the history of Christian thought, which in Aulén, as in Lutheran theologians almost generally, centres and comes to a climax in Luther. He finds that the main motif of the New Testament and of the Fathers was *coram deo* rather than *coram hominibus*, or from God to man rather than from man to God. In the 'classical motif' of the Christian faith God Himself is the subject of the Atonement. But in a theologian like Anselm God had to become man to enable man to satisfy God's demand for righteousness. Thus man's obedience and satisfaction, via Christ's death, made God's forgiving possible. Luther returned the Christian faith to a view of the Atonement as God's own self-giving for man, God's satisfying in concrete history the objective demand to remove the tension between His love and His holiness. God Himself paid the price of man's fall into sin in the suffering of His Son. Thus God as Agape in His own self, by His own deed, through His own suffering, made man's salvation possible not by bypassing the law but by Himself fulfilling it and offering man free entrance into the reality of a new righteousness by grace and faith.

Aulén's claim for agape is dramatically and centrally Christian. If he had only understood God's indirect work in creation and history and had appreciated more seriously how far God respects man's freedom, in Jesus and in all men, Aulén could have had a fuller insight into how the

Atonement is neither just *coram deo* nor just *coram hominibus* but, rather, both, a work of the God-man, wherein God works completely for man, and man, freed for God within full grace, works with God freely for man's salvation. A misdirected fear of synergism and defensive thinking lest salvation would not be by grace and faith alone very likely kept Aulén from going on to develop his central insight. A fuller grasp of the total work of grace and faith would have cured such misgivings. The Atonement is the reconciliation of the love and the holiness of God, both in God and in history, but not until man freely accepts forgiveness and a new relationship within which the holiness of God need no longer hold man off from his free and full acceptance of God's love. The objective work of God making such a relation possible needs to be fulfilled by man's free subjective acceptance of such redemption.

In his eschatology, too, Aulén has followed thoroughly the mandate of agape. To be sure, he has shifted his position from universalism to the putting of the final outcome beyond the limits of faith. On the face of it, universalism seems the only outcome of the work of sovereign agape. What other result can be consistent with the will of the Sovereign Lord who is Saving Love? But Aulén's putting the question beyond the limits of faith is no evasion of the full dictates of his fundamental motif. With Luther, at least in much of his writings, as ably demonstrated by Edgar Carlson in *The Re-Interpretation of Luther*, Aulén believes, we have seen, that theology is not a prediction along the lines of philosophy but a tensionful faith (*trons dristiga spänning*). To lessen this tension is to destroy faith. Faith is dramatic within a genuine historic dualism. We do not live in eternity beyond the conditions of earthly time. Thus we face a concrete existential situation where the truth is conditional on decision. Our relation to God depends on that decision. For us to believe or to teach truth as if eternity were here is to deny our humanity and to dishonour God. It is to lessen the tension of God's judgment of sin and of the grace wherein we stand even now both in fear and trembling and in daring hope. Thus we can trust God for a final outcome consistent with His sovereign agape and yet also remain basically within the tension which alone keeps faith fresh and strong. Thus Aulén's putting the final outcome beyond the limits of faith is thoroughly in line with his understanding and acceptance of God as agape.

III

Bishop Aulén has always been a strong churchman with a determined ecumenical outreach. His

view of theology as the work of the Church rather than of the individual theologian underlies his world-wide and church-wide concern. After all, the theologian only faithfully isolates and describes the faith (*tron*) of the Church. Thus at the Edinburgh World Conference on Faith and Order Aulén was its Vice-President. Three of his books since then have had this ecumenical outreach.

The Church, Law and Society [1948] he wrote for the Hewitt Lectureship, on the original sponsorship of the Andover Newton Theological School, which had been impressed by his solid theological scholarship. He chose the above topic because of his personal involvement with the fight against Nazism and his close connexion with Archbishop Berggrav. His stand burns with feeling. Aulén observed that our world has witnessed a most disastrous breakdown of justice and that the Church itself contributed to the breakdown by the separation of the realms of love and justice. Pietism and modernism, he held, have aggravated the problem: one by confining the gospel to personal salvation or believing it could change the world outright; the other by secularizing the gospel and shearing it of its power. Aulén here spoke to the world-wide Church begging it to become truly responsible for the social order by rejecting both passivism and perfectionism. He knew that natural theology as a realm apart from redemption is spurious and that natural law cannot be a self-sufficient realm apart from the presence of the living God. He accordingly enunciated the law of God as the dynamic law of God's presence in the social order. Law has been abolished in Christ once for all as a way of salvation, *in loco iustificationis coram deo*, but God Himself nevertheless works through His dynamic law of justice in all 'secular' or civil realms. Thus the concern of agape is itself inviolably for the highest and truest form of achievable justice within all the realms of Nature and history. He denied the separateness of what has come to be called the Lutheran 'two realms', the spiritual and the secular, and called for a fundamental unity of man's faith in God who is Agape, but who, though one, works self-same and yet differently within differing areas of human life. Thus Aulén salvaged the truths of natural theology and natural law while also delivering them from their all too often false separation from God and the power of the gospel. He summoned the Church to concerned action for the whole world in all realms of life but to work responsibly in the secular order according to the demands of justice dynamically in line with the living law of God.

In *Eucharist and Sacrifice* [1956] Aulén enters the ecumenical discussion about the Lord's Supper, discussing Roman Catholic and Anglican attempts

to come to terms with the problem of sacrifice. The Catholic tradition has insisted on the Church's continually sacrificing Christ in the Eucharist. The Reformation rejected such sacrifice, holding the celebration to be an act merely making available the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ for our sins. Aulén maintains that the view which holds that Christ's sacrifice is repeated implies that God was not completely reconciled on Calvary in the first place, and that it is really a pre-Christian view of placating God by the sacrifice of Christ rather than God's sacrificing Himself in Christ for the world. Aulén tries to mediate between the two ways of looking at the Eucharist by maintaining that the original sacrifice is all-sufficient, that there is thus no need for Christ's continual dying, and that the Church is in no position to offer Christ, but rather, that Christ is continuously present in the Eucharist as the living Lord Himself in His once-for-all deed for the world. He is the sacrificial Lord who in the Lord's Supper reaffirms or maintains His all-sufficient original sacrificial deed. The doctrine of the real presence takes care of what both the Catholics and the Reformers stood for. Aulén scorns any sacrifice of Christ which may seem to placate the Father, both for separating the Persons in the Trinity and for making the Father in effect less than Love. Thus Aulén aims both to show the true meaning of sacrifice in the Eucharist by pointing up the content of the Real Presence, and also to acknowledge the true sacrifice of the Church as that of praise, obedience, and service which are ever dependent upon and due to the original sacrifice.

The writer feels that Aulén has done a far more important work at this point than he can convey. His own hesitancy arises from the fact that, for him, Aulén's treatment does not run clear and central along the line of personal spiritual relations. All symbolic acts in Nature and history, especially God's might-acted Word in the sacraments, ought to be centrally emphatic on such personal relations. Then, too, here again, it seems, Aulén's complete *coram deo* view of the Atonement is too docetic to include man's freedom in the case of either the humanity of Christ or the believer generally. The total rejection of synergism, technically, the writer believes, is in fact the refusal both of the Incarnation and of incarnation as God's eternal purpose for man.

The third book is *Reformation and Catholicity* [1959]. In this work Aulén treats the main approach of the Orthodox Church, Roman Catholicism and its Anglican offshoot, with special reference to Reformation theology, which he naturally grounds in the New Testament and the faith and life of the Early Church. He discusses with depth the question of authority with regard

to Scripture and tradition, the meaning of the ministry, and the very worship on which the life of the Church depends. He does so throughout in an ecumenical spirit drawn from the nature of the universal gospel of Christ. He seems, however, especially sensitive to, and perhaps wounded by, the truth in the charge of Yves Congar in his *Vrai et fausse réforme dans l'église* to the effect that Reformation theology, especially the Lutheran confession, narrowed the gospel basically to the perspective *in loco iustificationis*. Aulén, however, appeals with right to the New Testament centrality of the Lordship of Christ and the forgiveness of sin. But he never successfully answers the charge that theology also has to reckon seriously with the total work of God in creation. Lutheran theology has been historically weak at this point, and in the present time the theology of Rudolf Bultmann only mirrors this fact. It has dismissed the basic task of interpreting God's work in Nature and general history as rationalism, *Weltanschauung*, or metaphysics. But the fact that a first-rank Lutheran theologian is wounded at this point and enters the ecumenical debate at his most vulnerable side is of first-rate ecumenical significance. We need the Lutheran stress on the primacy of the work of redemption, on God's direct relation to man in Jesus Christ through the forgiveness of sin, but we need equally much a different treatment of God's indirect, preparatory work in the realm of Nature and history. Aulén's defence is as strong as the case warrants and can be helpful for all who will study it.

In summary, the centrality of God as Agape in Christ will stand as long as the Christian faith is truly understood. Other theologians will widen the method, while keeping what is true in it, supplying the needed apologetic as the way the Church relates itself to all knowledge with integrity and concern. Existentially Aulén's primary concern with sin and guilt will speak seriously to all who deal with Christian theology. The full making of God as Agape central, of course, will put this existential priority of sin and forgiveness in its rightful secondary place systematically, when Christian theology is seen in its fullest scope. But, even so, we must surely accept Aulén's strong stress on the need of faith to remain within its daring tension if we are not to substitute philosophy for theology. The combining of a strong theology of God as Agape with the existential tension that can give us a living faith, where all seeing ends in the mystery of God and where all having ends in the hope which is engendered by 'the greatest of these', God's abiding and ever faithful agape, is Aulén's main achievement. In his humble yet insistent depicting of the tension-filled faith of agape, he has put us all deeply in his theological debt.